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ABSTRACT

This briefing paper focuses on the choices of instructional language in Pacific classrooms, as mandated by national or state policies, and discusses consequences of such choices on students' academic achievement and career preparation in the changing Pacific region. The paper first notes that in most South Pacific secondary schools, English is the language of the classroom, but for many upper grade students, English is their second language. The paper considers the misalignment of home and school languages, explaining that although the home languages of indigenous Pacific people are regarded by speakers and local authorities as an inherent part of indigenous culture and as the living language of the home, street, and community, they are rarely given a real role in academics. It then discusses some of the pros and cons of English as the language of instruction that Pacific educators must seriously consider. The paper goes on to discuss language and cognitive development and language policies across the curriculum, citing New Zealand as an example of a nation now using bilingual education in the development of ethnic preschools. (Contains 15 references.) (NKA)

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Language of Instruction: Choices and Consequences

By Fata Simanu-Klutz*

The Pacific Ocean is a "sea of islands" (Hauofa, 1994) covering one third of the earth's surface and offering a diversity of topographies, histories, languages, and cultures; a wide range of social, political, and economic experiences; and a multitude of responses to the balancing act between cultural maintenance on one hand and globalization on the other. Formerly based on subsistence economies, Pacific island life today is increasingly shaped by the languages and cultures of television, Hollywood, fast-food chains, trans-national corporations, tourists, bureaucrats, and returning Pacific Islanders. The English language—a powerful legacy of the Western world——seems to be gaining ground. The message to islanders is: Catch up with the West, with its supposedly higher quality of life, defined in terms of a cash economy, a television set in each room, a roof overhead, and escape from indigenous cultures and languages.

Pacific Islanders' desire to be both local and global, and to be lifelong learners who are productive in a society of increasing choice, has led to curricular and language changes in Pacific education. As English increasingly becomes the language of wider communication in the Pacific region, cultural and language use changes are increasingly apparent and are a matter of concern for Pacific educators and community members. Without doubt, language policies and practices have educational and social consequences, and these consequences may not always be beneficial for students and the community (Huebner, 1986). Sometimes they have accelerated indigenous language decline (Topping, 1981) and deterioration (Crocombe, 1994), and frequently they have failed to produce fully literate students.

This briefing paper focuses on the choices of instructional language in Pacific classrooms, as mandated by national or state policies, and discusses consequences of such choices on students' academ ic achievement and career preparation in the changing Pacific region.

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Choice of English as the Language of Instruction

The purpose of formal education in many Pacific communities has been to teach children proficiency in English. English—many islanders' second language—tends to be regarded as the gateway to life-long learning and productivity in a society of increasing choice. It has become the language of the classroom and the "elevator" to what is perceived by many Pacific Islanders as the desired life of the modern Western world. But in spite of this emphasis on English, younger generations are still not fully literate in either English or their indigenous language.

In most South Pacific secondary schools, English is the language of the classroom, and teachers and students are expected to conceptualize and communicate in English throughout the school day. However, many students in the upper grade levels speak English as a second language. One local government's policy is to introduce English as the official language of instruction. The policy also states that, "whenever possible," the indigenous language may be used to enhance understanding of concepts. In reality, because the students are more confident using their own language, teachers may continue to teach in the indigenous language, using English only when their classrooms are visited by Central Office staff. This situation has been observed and is understandable, considering that many teachers in the Pacific region speak local languages and may not have sufficient background in English—which is often their second language as well—to provide adequate classroom English experiences for students.

Most Pacific entities, particularly the U.S.-affiliated ones, spend approximately $1 million annually on English textbooks, most of which are for reading and language arts instruction. Although Pacific entities spend a substantial portion of their budgets on education, and particularly on language arts materials, the results have not always been encouraging. As one researcher criticizes, "The percentage of national budget spent on education does not necessarily indicate whether the investment…has been effective…Countries can spend large amounts of money on education and still fail to develop their young people into a valuable human resource" (Ahlburg, 1996).

Due to the numerous components of an English basal program, schools allocate more time to the English language arts program than to any of the other core curriculum areas. Instruction in the indigenous language is often scheduled after the lunch period, when the children are drowsy and less alert. In addition, instructional materials in local languages are very limited. Teachers report great difficulty in teaching the vernacular language when instructional materials are limited or lacking (Spencer, 1994).

In her article *Language, Knowledge and Development: The Micronesian Way*, Mary Spencer discusses problems in Micronesian science classrooms. Her premise is that, although materials in science education have improved in relevance and appropriateness for Micronesian students, students are still ambivalent towards science because (1) the system fails to align curriculum frameworks with what students experience in their daily lives, (2) textbooks in English are "incomprehensible" to many students, and (3) many teachers have limited preparation (Spencer, 1994). Spencer has observed that the English literacy or reading age of most Micronesian students is "at least five grade levels below their actual age," and that—

> We spend millions of dollars on textbooks that neither teachers nor students can read or understand and that have irrelevant content. We suppress the languages which are clearly the strongest mechanisms for the transmission of knowledge….We spend almost next to nothing to develop science education materials in the languages of the students with content relevant to the Pacific Island environments in which (Micronesian) teachers and students live. (Spencer, 1994)

Spencer's comments about science can apply to other areas of the school's curriculum as well.

Misalignment of Home and School Languages

The home languages of indigenous Pacific people are regarded by speakers and local authorities as an inherent part of indigenous culture and as the living languages of the home, street, and community; however, they are rarely given a real role in academics. In many Pacific schools, the language used by teachers and principals may be the same language of the children's homes. However, the language of instruction and testing at school is not. Some Pacific educators strongly believe that strict adherence to English alone when teaching concepts to limited English proficient students spells doom for their academic future (Muralidhar, 1994). Even if students are native speakers of English, Muralidhar points out that as knowledge becomes more specialized, so also becomes the language with which the knowledge is communicated. Muralidhar stresses that—

> ...teachers and curriculum designers need to pay greater attention to how ideas are communicated to students and how ideas are received from students. Pupils need to be given more opportunities and encouragement to communicate their thinking both orally and in writing. After all, this is one of the major stated aims of the Basic Science Curriculum. (Muralidhar, 1994)

In addition, many Pacific Island students who enroll in post-secondary schools, whether at home or abroad, face tremendous stress in their efforts to achieve academically. College faculty members frequently comment that a major source of stress for island students is that they are not adequately prepared to cope with a college culture that is verbally demanding, intellectually abstract, task-oriented, and generally unfriendly to indigenous languages and cultures (UH-Mānoa Task Force, 1994). Unfortunately, this happens not only to college students, but also to elementary and secondary students who encounter an unfamiliar language and culture in the classroom. Teachers and students might speak the same language and belong to the same cultural group, but students often face numerous learning barriers resulting from the misalignment of home and school language use (Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998).

It is commonly accepted that without adequate preparation in reading and writing in the English language, people today have difficulty gaining access to the full range of economic, social, and political opportunities. Although many Pacific Islanders have become proficient in basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) in English, the fact that many are not in college or holding high-paying jobs is indicative that their English literacy skills are not sufficiently developed (Morrison, Geraghty, & Crowl, 1994). Pacific educators must seriously consider recent research about choices of instructional language.

Language and Cognitive Development

There is general agreement that language and cognitive development are interdependent, and that children must be exposed to language-rich and cognitively challenging environments suitable for their age groups (Colkin, 1990). Before children are exposed to a great deal of "decontextualized" learning experiences, schools must provide a socially dependent learning environment, where learners have opportunities to work with each other and with what they already know and can potentially do. Researchers point out that children acquire language through a natural process, such as being immersed in their natural environments and learning through informal contexts such as babbling, imitating others, and hearing stories and folklore (Colkin, 1990). This process is not always one of conscious learning, but rather "is a product of engaging in meaningful interaction" (Colkin, 1990). In a society in which literacy plays a central role, children begin to acquire awareness of literacy and its uses very early in life, long before they attend school. Children learn from adult models specific functions of literacy, such as gathering of information, entertaining, gossiping, and communicating with persons who are not physically present. At one year of age, children from "literacy-salient envi-

ronments" may be trying out writing, "in scribbles that already are distinctively related to their caregiver's writing system" (Colkin, 1990).

Using and developing the first language in academics greatly promotes proficiency in the native language and eventual proficiency in a second language. Research documents that knowing one's first language well leads to an easier transition to learning a second language. This can never become a reality in Pacific classrooms if English is the primary language of instruction and first languages are still only considered the language of informal communication. Pacific teachers must be encouraged to write in the first language. It is even better if Central Office administrators use the first language in developing materials, policies, and even memoranda in the first language, to be translated into the second language only if needed.

Educators recommend that reading and writing instruction should be aligned with how children acquire language in order to help them become independent thinkers and learners. The practice of depending heavily on textbooks that have little resemblance to the children's world must be seriously questioned by Pacific educators. When the culture of the school is aligned with that of the home, cognitive development can be promoted in the first language. Children's prior knowledge and first language provide a critical foundation for their learning of new knowledge and language patterns. Only after this foundation has gained root in the classroom should decontextualized texts be used as a major source of new knowledge for children learning English as a second language.

Language Policies

Research in the 1980s and 90s point cogently to the need for a perceptual shift regarding the school's responsibility for students'language development (Corson, 1990). Many teachers, content specialists, and school administrators tend to regard language or literacy development as the sole responsibility of the language arts or English teacher, but it is everyone's responsibility. Because academic content is dependent on language, schools must pay attention to how language is used in ALL subjects of the curriculum. For example, authors use particular language patterns to express certain concepts or content. It is important to teach students how to deal with these language patterns so that they can effectively deal with different types of text. Teachers must model use of the writer's patterns or structures, and they must give students many opportunities to practice and internalize them. Therefore, when planning for the presentation of content, it is pertinent for the teacher to consider what language is best suited for readers and writers to understand each other. In essence, a language policy across the curriculum forces the traditional thinker to re-think the place of language in the curriculum. Where English is a second language or the language of academics, it makes better sense to have all teachers pay attention to the language development of students. A language policy that is sensitive to learners' needs will recognize the need to enforce such a position (Corson, 1990).

Bilingual Education in the Pacific

Worthy of mention are the developments in New Zealand's educational system and their impact on indigenous and migrant populations. At the leading edge of educational reform in perhaps the world, New Zealand's dismantling of the education department in the late 1980s allowed the *kanaka maoli*, or indigenous people, to gain ground in language and cultural revival. Today, Maoris, Samoans, Cook Islanders, and others are capitalizing on the decentralization of the public school system and are working with government agencies and churches to establish ethnic language preschools where children learn in traditional languages and through the cultures of their parents and grandparents. A singularly important requirement of these preschools is for teachers to refrain from speaking any English. Children who attend these ethnic preschools adjust well when they are enrolled in English-only schools. Once they are in English-only classrooms, the children, comfortable with their self-

identity, readily acquire the language of the school and society much more competently than their peers who did not have a similar background in their native heritage (Iuni Sapolu interview, 1996).

Conclusion

Because English is now regarded as the language of success in the Pacific region, policies on language use, even those extolling the value of indigenous languages, fall short of their promise to enable children to achieve proficiency in both. Pacific educators must become aware of the consequences of English-only instruction on both student learning and on local languages and cultures. An emphasis on English literacy before indigenous language literacy can negatively affect student learning. In addition, English literacy, as a political and economic tool, can have dire consequences on local languages and cultures (Topping, 1992). Other scholars are in agreement and urge corrective action.

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